

An Upside Down Christmas
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Christmas Eve 2021

When I was in sixth grade my family moved from Ohio to Miami, Florida.
We moved in October, so we had not yet acclimated to our new home
when Christmas came around.
And Christmas in Miami was like nothing I had ever seen in all my eleven years.
They decorated palm trees.
Local advertisements showed Santa Claus in shorts and Hawaiian shirts.
And even though I'd been invited to a New Year's Day pool party,
I was not dreaming of a green and fuchsia Christmas.
Everything was just wrong. It was backwards.
It was Christmas turned upside down.
My older sister had the same struggles,
so that year we took unprecedented action: we teamed up!
We put our collective feet down and told our parents
that the mangy old artificial tree we'd inherited from Grandma
was not going to cut it.
We needed a real tree.
Only a real tree would save this horrible, no good, very bad,
upside down Florida Christmas.
Our parents—perhaps recognizing how desperate we must be
if we were actually working together—
gave in and off we went to the Christmas tree lot.
I can still see my parents conversing in hushed tones behind one of the trees.
The trees cost more than they imagined.
My dad grew up on a farm surrounded by woods,
and he was accustomed to picking out a tree,
shooting its base with a shot gun,
and hauling it home.
So paying \$25 or \$30 for a tree was outrageous!
In today's dollars, that's \$130-\$150.
I don't know what they had to sacrifice to make that purchase,
but they did it because they knew we needed it.
We were experiencing an upside down Christmas.

Last year we all experienced an upside down Christmas.
 We were in the grips of a global pandemic
 without vaccines being readily available,
 and many of us had to drastically change our plans—and our expectations.
 We cancelled trips.
 We asked for books and puzzles instead of concert tickets.
 We visited with relatives via FaceTime and Zoom,
 or—if we were lucky—through the window or in the driveway.
 On Christmas Day we didn't need the extra leaf in the table.
 We only numbered four. Or two. Or one.
 It was an upside down Christmas.

And darn it, this year was supposed to be right-side up!
 This year even our elementary-aged children have been vaccinated,
 and a few months ago we thought we might have a near-normal Christmas!
 And some of us will, but others of us can't.
 Some of us are healthy enough that we can risk gathering together,
 while others of us are vulnerable or have vulnerable family members,
 so once again we are not experiencing the Christmas we want.
 The new variant is causing, for some people, another upside down Christmas.

I don't know if it's any consolation,
 but the first Christmas was pretty upside down, too.
 The Gospel According to Luke begins with the foretelling
 of the birth of John the Baptist—
 not to normal parents of child-bearing age,
 but to an old couple whose hopes of having children
 had long since dried up.
 An angel gave the news to old Zechariah,
 and instead of being able to announce it from the rooftops,
 he was made mute, unable to speak until his son was born.
 The person chosen to give birth to the Messiah
 was not mature and wise and experienced,
 but rather was a teenage girl whose only credential was that she said "yes."
 Joseph was told his fiancée was pregnant, before the wedding, and it wasn't his,
 but marry her anyway.
 All of it was upside down.

Then came the birth.

The birth of the Messiah took place not in a palace,
and the child was not clothed in royal robes.

Instead he was born in a humble abode
and laid in a feeding trough.

The birth announcement was made not by royal decree or to the religious elite,
but to poor manual laborers just doing their jobs.

Jesus' birth turned everything upside down.

And that's good because the world needed turning.

Jesus was born into a world of huge inequality and injustice,
a world where the rich exploited the poor
and the powerful subjugated the weak
and the oppressed had nowhere to turn.

Jesus was born into a world where one's honor was determined by birth
and one's value was decided by gender
and one's status could be changed without warning.

Jesus was born into a world that needed to be turned upside down.

And look what all this upside-down business accomplished.

By coming through unexpected parents,
God reversed our assumptions of worth.

By a male voice being silenced,
a female voice was given room.

By bringing birth in a humble dwelling,
God redefined power.

By appearing to laborers,
God reimagined the guest list.

Mary's song foretold the turning.

She sang of God bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly.

Zechariah's song foretold the turning.

He sang of God's mercy and the dawn that was yet to break forth.

Evidently music is the language of prophecy.

Music helps the turning.

One Christmas favorite assures us:

Truly He taught us to love one another;

*His law is love and His Gospel is Peace
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother
And in His name, all oppression shall cease*

It is our role now to continue the turning,
to see the places that need to be turned upside down
] in order for God's justice to be born.

Now, I want to acknowledge that not all upside-down-ness is good.
It's not good that our lives were turned upside down by a pandemic.
It's not good when our lives are turned upside down by grief or loneliness,
by violence or pain.
None of this is good, and none of this is from God.

But there are times and there are places where we need some turning.
So I want to ask you:

What in your life needs to be turned upside down this Christmas?
Where are you in need of God's grand reversal?
What in your life or our world needs to be redefined or reexamined,
rediscovered or reborn?

Long ago in Miami Florida two sisters needed a real tree
to save their upside down Christmas.

Today you can buy a 7' upside down Christmas tree on Amazon for only \$89.99.

The advantages of an upside down Christmas tree
are that the ornaments show up better,
and there's more room under the tree for presents.

No offense to any of you who have one, but I will not be buying an upside down
Christmas tree!

Still, I wonder, if I don't need what it has to give:
when things are turned upside down,
it is so much easier to see God's gifts.